

VZCZCXRO4658  
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM  
DE RUEHHI #0393/01 0530930  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 220930Z FEB 06  
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0857  
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 0566  
RUEHXS/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 000393

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS AND DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VM](#)  
SUBJECT: U.S.-VIETNAM HUMAN RIGHTS DIALOGUE: MEETING WITH  
VFM LE VAN BANG

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: DRL A/S Barry Lowenkron, accompanied by IRF Ambassador John Hanford met, February 20 with Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang. After reviewing the bilateral Human Rights Dialogue's morning session (septel), A/S Lowenkron urged the GVN not to constrain NGOs under an impending new law, adding that the Senate will be holding hearings on worldwide threats to NGO activity. He also raised the issue of internet freedom, noting the matter's increasing importance in the United States. On the subject of religious freedom, Ambassador Hanford remarked on the significant progress to date, but cautioned that areas of concern remain. VFM Bang said that progress on WTO is essential to ensure that a positive mood surrounds the President's visit, asked for U.S. support for an APEC that advances regional goals, addressed in familiar terms Vietnam's growing religious tolerance and pledged to work with the United States on issues of concern, including prisoners of conscience. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In between the morning and afternoon sessions of the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Human Rights Dialogue (HRD), DRL A/S Barry F. Lowenkron, accompanied by U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and Ambassador Marine, met with Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang (full participants' lists in Paragraph 13). A/S Lowenkron opened by noting the President's and Secretary's strong interest in the human rights situation in Vietnam and the desire to advance our agenda in this area. Although the HRD had been suspended in 2002, as a result of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai's 2005 visit to Washington, the two sides have turned a page. Vietnam and its dynamism since the promulgation of its "doi moi" (renovation) policy are impressive, and the United States does not want to see progress in human rights lag behind significant advances in Vietnam and in the bilateral relationship, A/S Lowenkron said.

¶3. (SBU) We would particularly like to see a number of prisoners of concern released, the A/S continued, and we will hand over an updated list. The list reflects the release of Nguyen Khac Toan, which was welcomed by the international community. The case of Pham Hong Son is of serious concern to us; the Congress and the American people will not understand why a country that wants better relations with the United States would imprison someone for translating and distributing a document from the State Department website.

NGO Law and Freedom of the Internet

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14. (SBU) There are two issues of growing interest in Washington, A/S Lowenkron continued. The first is related to the work of NGOs in advancing civil society. In our view, NGOs can play an important role in building civil society. As Vietnam moves to draw up an NGO law, it should constrain NGO activities. Freedom of the internet is another critical issue, about which Congress held hearings last week. The Secretary has directed the establishment of a Global Internet Freedom Task Force. This matter will continue to grow in importance because the United States feels very strongly about the freedom of the internet and its ties to freedom of expression. Although Vietnam and its laws will likely be the subject of discussion, other countries will also be discussed, A/S Lowenkron observed.

#### Religious Freedom

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15. (SBU) Ambassador Hanford noted that, during the morning session's abbreviated discussion on religious freedom, he had the opportunity to list Vietnam's important steps toward progress in this area. The May 5, 2005, exchange of letters required significant efforts in both Hanoi and Washington, and we are grateful for what VFM Bang and the MFA did to facilitate this. President Bush commented very positively about the agreement and it appeared to impact well on the Prime Minister's visit. The Secretary is also very supportive of our efforts to make progress, and she discussed religious freedom with Foreign Minister Nguyen Dzy Nien in Busan in November 2005. Ambassador Hanford said he may try to return to Vietnam soon to ensure that both sides understand each other completely in relation to religious freedom.

16. (SBU) On the issue of the re-designation of Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern in 2005, Ambassador Hanford noted that Vietnam had not yet made enough progress to merit delisting. There has been good progress in banning forced

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renunciations, although isolated incidents continue to occur. The prisoner list has almost entirely been erased. Registration and recognition remain key issues, particularly as regards previously closed churches, and local authorities need to do a better job implementing GVN policy. The Central and Northwest Highlands are particular problem areas, but there has been progress even there. The USG is committed to removing this issue as an irritant to relations and, as further progress occurs, we will hopefully be able to remove Vietnam's CPC designation.

17. (SBU) Ambassador Marine noted that the HRD is not just a meeting, but a process, and we look forward to continued work in all aspects of our human rights concerns. Over the past 18 months, our ability to discuss issues of concern has greatly expanded at both the national and local levels.

#### VFM Bang Responds: APEC, President's Visit...

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18. (SBU) VFM Bang said that the GVN is very encouraged by bilateral relations, particularly the success of the PM's visit. Vietnam is determined that 2006 should be a great year for bilateral relations. Looking at APEC 2006, Vietnam hopes to receive U.S. assistance in strengthening APEC and having it work more effectively for the Asia-Pacific region. On the President's trip, the GVN's goal is to create a positive atmosphere conducive to his visit to Hanoi. Vietnam will do its best to achieve this and will work as hard as it did for the PM's visit to the United States.

#### WTO, Security, Religious Freedom

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19. (SBU) One issue of concern is Vietnam's WTO accession, VFM Bang continued. Everyone in Vietnam is expecting

Vietnam to accede this year, and there will be much disappointment if there has not been a breakthrough by the time of the President's visit. VFM Bang will accompany the Vice Chairman of the National Assembly to Washington next week to discuss this matter with members of Congress and others. Vietnam is also looking at steps to strengthen mil-mil cooperation with the United States and counterterrorism information sharing.

¶10. (SBU) Vietnam's efforts to address issues of concern in the areas of human rights and religious freedom are not just to please the U.S. Congress, but are an integral part of Vietnam's ongoing doi moi policy, VFM Bang continued. Vietnam has come a long way in dealing with issues like religious freedom and freedom of the press. Internet use continues to increase rapidly, and close to 11 percent of the population uses the internet, which is not far off the international average. Vietnam has concerns about children's exposure to negative things on the internet, but it is willing to discuss this and other matters with the United States.

¶11. (SBU) Vietnam will also continue to work with the United States on prisoners of concern and will look at amnesties or sentence reductions. Based on Ambassador Hanford's request, the GVN hopes to be able to soon provide a province-by-province breakdown on the implementation of the legal framework on religion; so far, the response from the provinces has been positive. Religion is now a phenomenon in Vietnam, and new churches are being built all the time. The GVN's policy is not to prevent this.

NGOs

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¶12. (SBU) There are over 500 foreign NGOs in Vietnam and they bring in around USD 200 million/year, VFM Bang said. Vietnam now has a legal system to work with them (and VFM Bang himself is chair of the Foreign NGO Affairs Committee). Vietnam welcomes current NGO work in humanitarian and economic issues, and would also welcome it in political issues. A/S Lowenkron noted that Senator Lugar will hold hearings in March or April to discuss the growing worldwide efforts to crack down on NGO freedom. In closing, A/S Lowenkron said there is much work to be done in the area of human rights, and we have to continue our efforts to close the gaps between this area and the more positive areas in the bilateral relationship. We must do all we can to ensure a successful presidential visit.

¶13. (SBU) List of participants:

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United States

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Assistant Secretary Barry F. Lowenkron  
Ambassador John V. Hanford  
Ambassador Michael W. Marine  
Patricia Davis, National Security Council  
Michael Orona, DRL  
Clarissa Adamson, DRL/IRF  
Marc Knapper, Political Counselor  
Ben Moeling, Political Officer, Hanoi

Vietnam

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Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang

Mr. Pham Binh Minh, Director General, Department of  
International Organizations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
(MFA)

Mr. Nguyen Quang Thang, Director General, Department of

Internal Affairs, Office of the Government

Mr. Tran Van Thanh, Deputy Director General, Department of Security Advisory, General Security Department, Ministry of Public Security

Mr. Nguyen Ba Hung, Deputy Director General, Americas Department, MFA

Ms. Nguyen Thi Bach Tuyet, Deputy Director General, External Relations Department, Committee for Religious Affairs

Ms. Nguyen Thi Thu Quynh, Desk Officer, Department of International Organizations, MFA

Ms. Hoang Thi Thanh Nga, Desk Officer, Americas Department, MFA

Mr. Le Chi Dzung, Desk Officer, Americas Department, MFA

114. (U) A/S Lowenkron and Ambassador Hanford cleared this message.

MARINE